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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 1556
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 1423
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL PRIORITY 1992
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RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE PRIORITY 2494
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RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
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SUBJECT: FROM ASHGABAT TO MASHHAD: WESTERN DIPLOMATS GET A
TASTE OF IRANIAN CULTURE ON ROAD TRIP

¶1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY: Two female Western diplomats made a visit recently to Mashhad, Iran, and got a feel for the city and its residents. Although the city was historically and culturally interesting, the visitors increasingly felt the effects of Iran's closed and conservative society. Nevertheless, its citizens do not seem to harbor deep resentments against those from the West. END SUMMARY.

¶3. (SBU) During a recent lunch meeting with PolOffs, the OSCE Center in Ashgabat's Security Dimension Officer, Anna Suotola, described her recent tourist adventure to Iran with a female friend. On a lark, Suotola, a Finnish citizen, and her friend decided to embark on an unplanned, unscheduled road trip to Mashhad, having decided that Iran was too close to Ashgabat and too interesting to pass up. The trip had been so spontaneous that the two women did not even have hotel reservations.

¶4. (SBU) Having somehow procured Iranian visas at the embassy in Ashgabat, Suotola and her friend packed their scarves and procured road transportation to the Bajgiran border crossing point some 40 kilometers south of Ashgabat. They walked across the border, then hired a taxi to take them on to Mashhad, at least 200 kilometers south and east of the border crossing. The two women befriended the taxi driver, who helped them make contact with a little tourist agency in town and find a hotel. (NOTE: According to information available on the Internet, most foreign visitors are required to provide information on their itinerary and hotel arrangements as part of the visa application process. We are not sure how the women circumvented this requirement. END NOTE.)

¶5. (SBU) Finding an available hotel was difficult, since Mashhad is a major Shi'a pilgrimage destination, but the agency found them a room on the outskirts of town. Their tourist agency contact was also very helpful, and offered to help them gain access to the most sacred Shi'a site, the Shrine of Imam Reza. (NOTE: Imam Reza was the eighth imam of Shi'ite tradition, martyred in the 9th century. Some 20 million Shi'a are thought to visit the site each year, a

pilgrimage considered by Shi'a to be second to that of Mecca.
END NOTE.) The shrine is exceptionally sacred, and only
Shi'ite believers are permitted to enter its grounds.

16. (SBU) The tour guide acquired appropriate chadors for the two women, and instructed them on how to wear them. He instructed them to cover all but their eyes, and said they should say they were "Turkmen" if anyone were to ask. (NOTE: Suotola is a tall, ultra-blond Finn with blue eyes. END NOTE.) The women were permitted to enter the shrine. Anna said that there were women officials on the grounds of the shrine who monitored security and assured the appropriate dress of women visitors. If a veil was being worn inappropriately or a woman was not otherwise properly covered, they were authorized to tap the violator with a five foot-long, rainbow-colored duster, and demand immediate correction of the infraction.

17. (SBU) Anna reported that the trip was an amazing opportunity to see things that few international tourists are able to see, but that the constant requirement to cover up with long jackets and veils in the warm spring weather was a stifling experience for modern Europeans. She said the city was vibrant with commercial and tourist activity, although of a domestic, rather than foreign nature. The primary reminder that they were in a unique location, she noted, was a solitary sign in English that she saw: "Down with America."

18. (SBU) Another sign emerged when the two women ordered food for delivery to their hotel room. When the young delivery man knocked on their door, Suotola said she forgot

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to don her veil, and quickly answered the door. The delivery man was visibly shocked, and backed away from the door and averted his eyes. Suotola said she had to pay the man while concealed by the door. The next day, another delivery person brought food to them, but had apparently been briefed by his colleague about the foreign women in the hotel and stood with back turned away from the door and eyes on the floor. Overall, however, she said she found the city's residents to be friendly and openly interested in all things Western.

19. (SBU) COMMENT: Although we are uncertain how the women were able to acquire visas so easily, their spontaneous road trip underscores the reality of how close Iran is to post. However, it is not surprising that Western visitors would note the effects of Iran's self-imposed isolation and religious conservatism before almost anything else. END COMMENT.
CURRAN